Introduction

My intention in this book is to cross boundaries within the discipline of theology in a search for integration. The key topics of Christian doctrine are explored in a way neither simply dogmatic nor historical; rather this is a stab at a systematic theology which has contemporary coherence, but is informed, not by the usual dialogue with contemporary philosophers or theologians, but rather by engagement with the theology of the early church fathers who laid down the parameters of Christian theology and enshrined key concepts in the creeds.

Appropriation of theology from the past necessarily starts by adopting a historico-critical approach to reading extant work – it cannot simply be the exposition of tradition as if tradition could straightforwardly be adopted without question in a totally different intellectual context, as was recognized in Maurice Wiles' programme of 'doctrinal criticism'. On the other hand, we are ourselves constrained by our post-Enlightenment, post-modern mind-sets, and the possibility must be entertained that thinkers of the past might challenge the unquestioned assumptions which inform present conceptual frameworks. Being as true as possible to texts from the past, while also being true to ourselves, may be described as 'ethical reading'.[1] This requires balance between reception and distance, between critique and respect, acknowledging both kinship and otherness. In this respect the aim is a kind of ecumenism over

[1] See my articles, 'The Pastorals and the Ethics of Reading', *JSNT* 45 (1992), 105–20; 'Allegory and the Ethics of Reading' in Francis Watson (ed.), *The Open Text* (London: SPCK, 1993), pp. 103–20.

time, a respectful listening to the theological commitments of those with whom we share an identifiably common faith but in very different circumstances.

To make sense of things means being coherent in our terms, while letting perspectives from other worlds contribute, as they prove to ring true or provide maps and guides which clearly cover the same terrain, even if out of date. What I offer, then, is a conversation in which the interests and anxieties of myself and my contemporaries influence the selection and reading of past texts, yet allow sometimes strange ideas to contribute to shaping our own understanding. So I endeavour to expound patristic theological argument and insights with empathy and sensitivity to context, then to explore how this material might contribute to constructing a theological position which is tenable by someone like myself in the circumstances of today. Two points inform this undertaking:

- Texts (whether classical or canonical) potentially have a future, and may become transformative.
- Theology is an exploratory rather than an explanatory discipline – 'faith seeking understanding'.

Though largely shaped as hermeneutical engagement with the intellectual, moral and spiritual reasoning of the fathers, this study bears testimony to a theological journey through modernity and post-modernity. The struggle with modernity shaped the minds of my generation, which has then been faced with the questions of post-modernity – the breakdown of a common rationality in the face of pluralism, the cry for justice in the midst of an unjust century. We cannot avoid the challenges of racism, religious traditions other than Christianity, feminism and disability issues, any more than previously the challenge of science, psychology and sociology. We occupy a particular place in the history of thought and culture. Yet the principal focus of my scholarship has been texts from a different world, a pre-modern world where such matters were never considered. So, my aim is integrity and integration, a systematic

theology of an unusual kind, covering the standard *topoi* but not in a standard way, and embracing other aspects of my experience too:

- ecclesial life: the search for an understanding of theology that can affirm and celebrate different histories, relationships and identities, including the ministry of women, within an ecumenical horizon
- public life: the search for an understanding of Christian theology which is robust enough to discern the presence of God in a post-Christian, pluralist society, within a globalized world dominated by science and technology, and on a planet subject to humanly induced climate change
- personal life: from long, and sometimes desperate, searching for answers to the discovery that questions of theodicy cease to engage as over forty years of caring for a profoundly disabled son gives privileged access to the deepest truths of the Christian religion.

As a systematic theologian I need to make sense of all my experience. If that seems ambitious, my only response can be affirmation of the amazing journey made through the months of pulling together the material presented here. It has indeed been an experience of integration for which I am heartily grateful.

Integration also involves, in my case, daring to include writing in less academically conventional registers. To describe theology as second-order discourse is to fix it in a critical and reflective mode foreign to the ethos of patristic theology, which was never divorced from prayer and the life of the church. So, a prelude to each chapter offers a collection of snapshots whose purpose is to earth the topic in the everydayness of language and living; and two other genres appear, both of which I would defend as creating discourse more directly appropriate to theology than propositions philosophical or historico-critical:

(1) A postlude to each chapter offers some of my own poetry. Poetry is surely not 'second-order' reflection on discrete

primary experience. Rather, in the gift of images, symbols and other figures of speech, along with the constraints of form, a kind of creative spirit enables the generation of elusive yet direct insight (or *theōria*) into truths that transcend logocentric rationality.[2] Language is necessarily the medium of theology, but theology can never be reduced to language – appropriate language always points beyond itself. In the mid-twentieth century, when linguistic philosophy dominated the intellectual scene, the status of religious language was a key issue. But the fact that religious language does not straightforwardly work in the same way as everyday, or even scientific, language was well recognized already by the church fathers, who knew that languages are multiple and translation from one language to another is indicative of its accidental rather than essential relationship with the things to which it refers. Trained in rhetoric, they knew that, even in the same language, the same thing can be said in many different ways, that language constantly points beyond itself and that language is inadequate to theological task.[3] Ephrem the Syrian discerned a parallelism 'between God's two incarnations, first into human language when "He put on names" in Scripture, and then the Incarnation proper';[4] since God was incarnate, or rather inscribed, in words – in types and symbols and metaphors which point beyond themselves, he found poetry the most satisfactory medium for his theology. Ephrem's precedent justifies the poetic postludes.

(2) But the primary genre of theological discourse must be preaching. Surely it is no accident that so much extant patristic material is in the form of sermon or homily; furthermore, theological affirmation in the context of liturgy is surely performative, and not merely descriptive, reflective or second order. Accordingly,

[2] See Chapters 4 and 6. [3] See Chapter 8.

[4] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome: CIIS, 1985, republished Cistercian Publications, 1992), p. 32.

each chapter contains some material attributed to 'the preacher'. This trope allows for the inclusion of story, symbol, illustration, even personal testimony, as well as examples of how scripture comes alive through insight and application to the realities of experience. It therefore lies at the very heart of this enterprise.

Each of the eight chapters might stand alone as an essay on a particular theological topic, yet together they provide a consistent overview of the subject. Recurring motifs shape the over-arching theological perspective:

- a reading of the Bible as essentially a transformative text, the Creator God being presented in scripture as constantly at work to bring order out of chaos, good out of evil, and inviting human actors into this activity
- the inadequacy of the 'Craftsman' or Demiurge analogy for God's creativity (with attendant consequences for 'intelligent design')
- the sense of 'creatureliness' as a fundamental constituent in theological reasoning in the Christian tradition, as well as in liturgical and ethical responses to life's giftedness
- the wisdom of intellectual humility: the limitations of created intelligence, human language and conceptuality – the potential for idolatrous language and conceptuality – the *hybris* of attempts at theodicy – the privilege of 'liminal' experiences and utter weakness as access to the deepest theological insights
- the apparent will of the transcendent God to accommodate the divine self to the human level, to work through particularities and the constraints of history, paradoxically exercising power through weakness
- the sacramental perspective which seems to shape and unite the incarnation, the scriptures as Word of God, the eucharist, the church, enabling the discernment of the Creator through the creation, of the Spirit in ordinary, physical dailiness, of God in God's human image and the human community of the Body of Christ

- *corruptio optimi pessima* – fall and redemption as an over-arching narrative that rings true to the way the world is, with all its ambiguities, and the way human persons experience their innermost selves and actions
- the inseparability of truth, beauty and goodness
- true love as without power or possessiveness – *apatheia*/detachment as essential to love, and the fundamental significance of that for understanding God's *oikonomia*, as well as human response to the love commandments in contemplation and action
- the significance of facing the 'other' for theological, ethical and spiritual transformation
- the 'otherness' of God – we know something of God through the divine activities, but not the divine essence – God's utter transcendence yet universal *episcopē* – the paradox of God's concurrent absence and presence
- the mystery of the Trinity as the all-embracing, overflowing wisdom of divine love.

1 From pondering scripture to the first principles of Christian theology

Prelude

The child is gripped by stories in a children's Bible; the teenager puts the book on the same shelf as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

The archaeologist explores ancient sites, while the expert deciphers inscriptions in ancient scripts, construes unearthed texts in ancient languages and notes telling parallels to the biblical literature.

The student learns Greek and Hebrew, and encounters a world distant in time, geography, language and culture; the scholar analyses style, notes *aporiai* in the text, probes questions about origin and redaction, date and provenance, authenticity and historicity.

The apologist struggles with scientific and moral challenges to the Bible's wisdom and veracity; the fundamentalist reverses the priorities, asserting the Bible's authority over against human ideas.

The theologian seeks to make sense of God and the universe, of human nature and human life, of history and human behaviour, in the light of contemporary knowledge about the way things are, as well as the Bible and the traditions of Christian doctrine.

The simple believer memorizes key words to guide action and shape prayer; the preacher picks up the lectionary, seeking to relate the texts to liturgy and life . . .

* * *

The preacher[1] opens the Bible at the Gospel lection for the Sunday eucharist, Mark 9.30–7: Jesus is teaching his disciples in private that

[1] Preparing for worship on 20 September 2009.

the Son of Man is to be handed over to be killed, and three days later will rise again. Then, in Capernaum, Jesus asks what the disciples were arguing about on the way; they are silent because they had been discussing who was greatest. Jesus' response is to sit down, observing that anyone who wants to be first must make themselves last and servant of all; and, taking a child in his arms, he adds, 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.'

The preacher turns to the lection appointed from the Old Testament, Proverbs 31.10–31, the description of the good wife; then to the epistle, James 3.13–4.3. With these three passages read together for the first time, and in the context of the approaching liturgy, a fresh reading emerges that enables discernment of the Word of God for congregation and preacher on this unique and sacramental occasion. The scriptures offer wisdom, wisdom that upturns the high-mindedness and ambition of human cultures, placing value instead on the little child; on modesty and love of peace rather than rivalry and claims to truth; on the woman and her everyday provision of life's necessities, such as food and clothing; on Christ's willingness to be handed over to death for the sake of new life. What the Word of God evidently intends (its *skopos* or aim) is a kind of 'trans-valuation', a wisdom that will initiate transformation in the congregation, as those who hear come to discern the reality of God's presence in life's everyday ordinariness, its struggles, its suffering, even its tragedy and death. This is a Word destined to be fully focussed in the bread and wine of the eucharist, ordinary yet extraordinary, pointing beyond itself, to Christ and the new life made possible by his sacrifice.

The homily begins to shape itself. It would begin with a modern parable, showing how the place where we find redemption is in the ordinary everyday. William Trevor's *Love and Summer*, a poetic evocation of the everyday routines of mundane existence on a farm and in a country town in Ireland, would provide this. The woman in Proverbs 31 and the women characters in the novel reflect one another in different ages and circumstances. Ordinary goodness and

a kind of peace is captured in regular habits; yet a potential time-bomb is thrown in with the chance meeting of two young people and the slow, unintentional development of a clandestine love affair. The young man is working through long-term disappointment in love and, even before the affair begins, is all set on selling up and leaving Ireland for good; while the woman is experiencing love for the first time and soon begins to dream of going with him. But her guilt is palpable – she's an orphan, brought up by nuns, sent to be a maid for a widowed farmer, who married her.

The penultimate day comes. She buys a hold-all and supplies of food for the house to be abandoned, then arrives home to find things in unaccustomed disarray. The door is jammed. She fears her husband has shot himself, but it's only a fallen welly-boot. He's overwhelmed by something. She dreads the possibility that he's heard gossip. Gradually it comes out – a confused local has sought him out and said things which caused his distress. His widowhood was the result of an accident – he'd backed the tractor and wagon over his former wife and his child. He interprets what's been said as public suspicion that he'd done it on purpose, because his wife had been with another man.

> In the silent kitchen it came coldly to her that the tragedy of the man who had taken her into his house was more awful by far than love's denial . . . And it came coldly, too, that the truth she yet might tell to draw the sting of his agony would cause more suffering than she could inflict, more than any man who had done no wrong deserved.[2]

Next day she doesn't leave after all; she helps her husband with a chore in the farmyard. He acknowledges she made it easier for him – she's helped to defuse his fear. Her lover, as he departs, hints at his own guilt, and the likelihood that, without meaning to, he would have destroyed her if she'd come with him. He says two significant things: 'People run away to be alone', and 'He saved you. That old

[2] William Trevor, *Love and Summer* (London: Viking/Penguin, 2009), p. 198.

man.'[3] Thus the story subverts the expectations of the modern novel. Instead of the joys of romantic love and fulfilment, the value of ordinary, unromantic faithfulness to the everyday is celebrated.

For the epistle of James that gentleness is wisdom, wisdom from above that is willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality or hypocrisy, righteousness sown in peace. And the upturning of expectations is found in the Gospel, too – the little child, the sufferings of Christ.

After drawing out the truths in those lections, the sermon would tell another story. The preacher's severely disabled son, Arthur, would be present, as usual, in the congregation; she would recall a time when he was present for evening prayers with the Othona community. The old stone chapel was the kind of place which would stimulate him into incoherent noise, fascinated by the echo. The prayer leader had planned to spend the time in silence, but knew it was impossible; so he said, 'We will create silence by singing Psalms' – Arthur is quiet and listens to music. With guitars and flutes, one Psalm after another was sung, in the 'Othona' version. Psalm 131 went like this:

I am too little, Lord,
To look down on others.

I've not chased great affairs
Nor matters beyond me.

I've tamed my wild desires
And settled my soul.

My soul's a new-fed child
At rest on the breast.

My brothers, seek the Lord,
Both now and for ever.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 205–6.